

Skinner Award

The Morris F. Skinner Award honors outstanding and sustained contributions to scientific knowledge through the making of important collections of fossil vertebrates — it shall also be made to those persons who encourage, train or teach others toward the same pursuits.

ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS

- Nominees do NOT need to be members of SVP.

HOW TO APPLY

Submit nominations via the online award submission system. Required information to be submitted includes:

- One (1) letter of nomination
- Letters of Support from at least two (2) but no more than four (4) colleagues should be submitted through the online application system.

The 2020 awards application process is now closed.

QUESTIONS?

Daniel Goujet, Chair, Skinner Award Panel, goujet@mnhn.frc

Learn more about Morris Skinner

Morris F. Skinner (1906-1989) was a charter member of SVP and dearly loved the profession, from the field, to the fossils that he collected, to studying what they meant for vertebrate evolution and biostratigraphy, to his admiration for colleagues, students, and others with an interest in VP. Raised in northern Nebraska, in the late 1920s Morris and his childhood friend Jim Quinn collected vertebrate fossils that were brought to the attention of the museums in Lincoln, Denver, and as far away as New York. Morris then received a BS in geology from the University of Nebraska in 1932. During the Dust Bowl years and thereafter, Morris was hired by the philanthropist Childs Frick to collect fossil mammals for half of the year from many localities in the western U.S. For the other half of the year, Morris and his family moved to NY where he worked in the Frick Laboratory at the AMNH. Amazing specimens and collections resulted from these and other Frick collecting activities. In the mid 1960s when the Frick Collection was formally transferred to the AMNH, Morris became a Frick Associate Curator until he retired in 1973, although he remained engaged in VP almost until his death.

Morris was a collector extraordinaire and instilled this quality in those who came in contact with him. He and his wife, Shirley Marie (White) Skinner, recently deceased (2007), instilled in youth and others that worked with them a love of paleontology, a solid work ethic, and a nurturing spirit. Many of these young boys that grew up in central Nebraska went on to lead productive lives, for example the VPer Bob Emry (recently retired from the USNM). The Skinners also inspired many students, visitors, and colleagues at the AMNH. Particularly after the Frick Collection officially became part of the AMNH, Morris freely gave access to these collections and encouraged them to be studied. Anyone who today visits the 2nd ("horse") floor of the VP collections at the AMNH cannot help but be awestruck by this amazing collection that is largely his legacy. Although the term "world-class" is frequently used, the Frick fossil horse collection truly is the most comprehensive in the world, with none other even coming close to it for an understanding of the North American Equidae. Having collected many beautifully-preserved skulls of Cenozoic equids from the western US, Morris realized that the then-existing paradigm of classifying fossil horse species based mostly on teeth was too simplistic. He was the principal architect of what has become the North American school of thought, where Neogene equid systematics can only be understood from a holistic approach that also includes skull morphology, particularly the configuration of preorbital fossae. When this author did a term paper on horse evolution as a graduate student, Morris was delighted and spent many hours giving of his knowledge and ideas, while Marie at the same time encouraged me and built my confidence. Although Morris had curatorial responsibility over several groups of fossil mammals, his first love was the horses.

Before the Frick Collection was readily made available for study, there was some question about the quality of stratigraphic data associated with specimens collected by the Frick field groups. Perhaps because of his geology training, Morris was a stickler for precisely documenting the provenience of each fossil collected, to the point where much of the data are actually neatly written on the specimens themselves. A half-century later, the biostratigraphic precision of the Skinner collections continues to make them a valuable resource for fine-scale evolutionary studies and they are the standard by which provenience data of other collections can be compared.

Morris was the author of about 25 papers on the Frick fossil mammals, including taxonomic studies of groups such as horses, antilocaprids, and bison, as well as important contributions about Cenozoic stratigraphy of the Great and High Plains. Many of his important papers were coauthored by Marie as she was a skilled assistant and editor. Morris' intellectual legacy continues through the many other publications that have resulted from his influence on other VPer, as well as his spirit embodied in the collections. Morris received several formal honors and awards. In 1985 the SVP presented a certificate of recognition to both Morris and Marie..."for a long career of excellence in collecting, curating and studying vertebrate fossils including the documentation and interpretation of the stratigraphy of the sediments in which they occur..." In 1978, Morris received an honorary Doctor of Science from the University of Nebraska. He was made an Honorary Member of SVP in 1986. Prothero and Emry (1996) edited

a volume of research contributions on Eocene-Oligocene terrestrial sediments and mammalian faunas dedicated to Morris Skinner's memory.

On the personal side, Morris was a character, for sure. About Morris, long-time friend and protégé Bob Emry (1990, p. 94) wrote that his:

"human side is more difficult to define. He was gregarious, good-humored (sometimes earthy), loved a practical joke, and enjoyed being devil's advocate. He would probably have considered it a compliment to be characterized here as a crusty, difficult old SOB, but anyone who knew him well enough to get beyond a first impression will also know that it simply disguised a genuinely generous and caring humanist, very sensitive to the less fortunate among us."

My personal experience likewise indicated that although one's first impression of Morris might have him as an earthy or crusty midwesterner, he was a generous sort, encouraging, and with a kind heart. He did not like formality. After receiving his honorary "chair" in VP at the University of Nebraska, I asked Morris "so what do you think about your chair?" He responded: "what good is it — I can't even find it!" He had a great sense of humor, including a wonderful deep bellowing laugh. In his early years (long before this author knew him) when Morris and Jim took breaks from collecting fossils, for fun they would hide behind rocks along the northcentral Nebraska canyons and shoot at each other with rifles. So, the story goes. Luckily, no-one was hurt.

In 1990 the SVP established the Morris F. Skinner Award, which honors outstanding and sustained contributions to scientific knowledge in the making of important collections of fossil vertebrates, or the encouragement, training and teaching of others in the field.

Bruce J. MacFadden (September 2007)

(In writing this retrospective, I appreciate the insight and acknowledge using the content of an article written about Morris by Robert J. Emry [1990], as well as the photos and perspective provided by Raleigh Emry.)

For additional reading:

Colbert, E. H. 1980. A Fossil-hunters Notebook. Dutton, NY. See pp. 58-62.

Emry, Raleigh E. 2002. Good Times in the Badlands. Writer's Showcase, San Jose CA.

Emry, Robert. J. 1990. Obituaries: Morris F. Skinner, 1906-1989. Society of Vertebrate Paleontology News Bulletin. 149:93-95.

Galusha, T. 1975. Childs Frick and the Frick Collection of fossil mammals. Curator 18:5-15.

Prothero, D. R. and R.J. Emry (eds.). 1996. The Terrestrial Eocene-Oligocene Transition in North America. Cambridge University Press, NY.